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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a major educational reform effort in Thailand and examines its development in the light of frameworks suggested by House and by Berman. Internal, or organizational, factors affecting the Thai educational system as well as factors affecting the external context, or environment, are considered. The educational reform had two phases. The first covered the period 1973 to 1977 and was begun when student demonstrations against the existing military government helped overthrow that government. Subsequently, reforms in education were initiated as part of a movement toward greater democratization of the country. A respected committee was established to lay the groundwork for systematic educational reform. Its four major recommendations focused on promoting social justice through more equitable allocation of educational resources, changing the grade structure of the system, making the curricula more practical and relevant to the real life needs of learners, and changing the administrative structure. The second phase of the reform movement began after a coup d'etat that installed a more conservative and repressive government, preventing the full realization of the reforms. Of the factors mentioned by Berman, the episodic change in external political conditions was the most germane to the Thai experience. (Author/IRT)

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EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THAILAND

EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE AND POLITICAL IMPERMANENCE

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> Outcomes of educational change efforts tend to be context-dependent and time-dependent.
>
> Paul Berman 1979:35

> The political perspective views innovation as a matter of conflicts and compromises among factional groups
>
> Ernest House, 1979: 0

Educational reform has been attempted in a wide range of settings such as Chile, Peru, China, Nepal, Thailand, and the United States (see Fisher 1979; Cleaves 1976; Unger 1980; Murray 1980; Sippanondha 1974; and Carnoy and Levin 1976). Typically educational reform involves such elements as changing the structure of education (7-3-2 to 6-3-3, for example, in Thailand); modifying the administration of education, usually with a stress on greater decentralization or deconcentration; making the system more open to "disadvantaged"groups; shifting the nature of financing education; and adapting the curriculum to make it more consistent with local conditions. Thus, not surprisingly, educational reform has not come easy and various obstacles have frequently been encountered.

A wide range of factors may affect the potential implementation of educational change. Berman (1979: 45-46) in a recent paper provides a helpful categorization of such factors. Berman groups them into five major categories: 1) local contextual conditions, 2) primary attributes of the change effort, 3) local policy choices, 4) endogenous

variables, and 5) external variables. Particularly relevant to the Thai educational reform case are factors such as the complexity of the change effort, scope of the change effort, participation strategies, support generation strategies, use of outside assistance (non-use in the Thai case), support for the change effort, degree of conflict over the change effort, organizational arrangement, and clarity about innovation. Finally, the external variable of episodic changes in context is seen as a crucial element in the Thai case, which explains much of the impermanence of politics which in turn directly affects the evolution of educational change.

House (1979) also provides an interesting framework for thinking about educational innovation. He presents three alternative perspectives for analyzing innovation. They are the technological, the political, and the cultural. The technological perspective emphasizes innovation as a "research, development, diffusion, adoption paradigm" (p.8). This view emphasizes efficiency and rationality. The political perspective in contrast emphasizes innovation as the outcome of conflicts and compromises among interest and factional groups. Finally, the cultural perspective conceives innovation as the interaction among distinct and separate cultures. According to House, "conflicts and misunderstandings are interpreted as conflicts in values" (p.13).

Given Berman's typology, it is clear that some of the factors affecting educational change and reform in Thailand are internal or organizational in nature. Others are external, related to the

context and environment. In this paper, we consider both types of factors and how they have related to possibilities for educational reform in Thailand during the 1974-1980 period.

The Thai educational reform has had two distinct phases or stages. The first phase discussed in this paper covers the period, 1973-1977. The second phase starts in late 1977 with the coming into power of the first Kriengsak government and continues until the present. The ups and downs of the reform over time provide rich data for considering the complex relationship between politics and education. At the close of his book on the politics of educational change, Kogan (1978:157) states that he has "been uncertain as to how far social changes have derived from education or how far educational change is itself merely an expression of wider social changes." The Thai experience described in this paper relates directly to this important question.

The Thai Political and Educational Context

For readers unfamiliar with the Thai political and educational context, some brief background may be helpful. Prior to 1932, Thailand was an absolute monarchy. A coup d'etat in 1932 led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Since 1932, the military has tended to dominate Thai politics, though from time to time civilian governments have been in power, but usually for only limited periods of time (Thak 1979; Thinapan 1975). Impermanence of political leadership has been a key characteristic of Thai politics from 1932 to date (see Pridi 1970; Morell and Morell 1973), and this has been an important external factor affecting possibilities for educational reform.

Traditionally education in Thailand was associated with the temple and Buddhist clergy. As Thailand modernized, King Chulalongkorn introduced Thailand's first and perhaps most significant educational reform, to create a formal national educational system controlled by the central government (see Wyatt 1969).

The administrative nature of Thailand's educational system, prior to 1980, has been indeed complex. Not one, but four Ministries have been responsible for education. Since 1966 and until recently, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has been responsible for the administration of nearly all primary schools outside Bangkok. The ostensible rationale for this arrangement has been the MOI's respnsibility for all aspects of local government. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has been primarily responsible for secondary

education, post-secondary vocational-technical education, and teacher-training colleges. It has also been responsible for technical aspects of primary schooling (i.e., curriculum and supervision). The Office of University Affairs (OUA) which has cabinet status, has been responsible for higher education. Finally, the office of the Prime Minister houses the National Education Commission, Thailand's primary educational policy and planning body. In Thailand, there are also a wide range of nonformal education activities under other ministries such as agriculture and defense.

The Thai Educational Reform

On October 14, 1973, the students of Thailand led a massive demonstration against the then existing military government. In the most violent political change in Thai history, a military dictatorship was overthrown and civilian democracy restored in Thailand.

As part of the movement toward a greater democratization of all aspects of Thai society, a number of reforms were initiated. One of the most significant was in the education area. A special committee of prominent and highly respected Thai intellectuals and bureaucrats was established by the Council of Ministers to lay the groundwork for systematic educational reform. The committee was headed by a brilliant Harvard trained nuclear physicist, Dr. Sippanondha Ketudat. The membership of the committee was interesting in two respects. First, it did not include non-bureaucratic elements (Bennett nd) such as ordinary farmers or workers. Second, it included not only those trained in education, but also individuals with such diverse backgrounds as economics and astronomy. The committee was given six months to prepare its recommendations to the Cabinet.

The committee along with ten special sub-committees

produced a massive data-based report for submission to the government (NEC 1974). The reform was organized around four basic questions:

(1) What is the desirable education?

(2) What are the objectives of Thai education?

(3) For whom should education be organized?

(4) How should education be organized?

The reform committee from the beginning took a broad view of education, emphasizing its many links with a wide range of external environments such as the political, economic, social, and natural. A basic theme of the reform was that there should be harmony between the educational system and its external environments.

The reform dealt explicitly with seven substantive areas:

1) equality in education

2) structure of the educational system

3) content and learning process

4) roles and status of teachers

5) higher education

6) private education

7) educational administration system

The basic findings of the reform committee can be briefly summarized as follows:

With respect to equality in education, marked disparities were found at all levels of education, both in terms of quantitative and qualitative differences. Budget allocations for primary schooling were found to favor greatly those attending urban schools. With respect to higher education,

because it was seen as a source of inequality. The committee was also concerned about the low quality of many private schools, and the illegal tea-money charged by some. Another major problem was considered to be the poor quality of the teaching staff in such schools.

The final substantive area considered by the committee and probably the most complex and controversial, was the educational administration system. The major conclusion was that there were too many different agencies responsible for education, resulting in inefficiency and ambiguity concerning accountability.

Reform Recommendations

The four major reform recommendations can be summarized briefly as follows:

1) To promote social justice, educational resources should be allocated more equitably with special concern for low quality schools in rural areas. Tuition fees for higher education should be increased to reflect costs more fully.
2) The educational structure should be changed from a 4:3:3:2 system to a new 6:3:3 system. The new structure should be introduced on a gradual year-to-year basis.
3) Curricula most be modified to become more practical and relevant to the real life needs of learners. Work experience should be part of the curriculum. There should also be an increased emphasis on rational thinking and problem-solving. The nation-wide terminal grade examinations should be eliminated.

4) Central administration of all levels of education should fall under only one ministry, the Ministry of Education. At the same time, the MOE should decentralize its power and management to local levels.

These recommendations and the reform report were submitted to the Cabinet for approval. The reform was approved and special implementation committees were established. During 1975, these committees were working out the details of implementation to submit to the Government.

Obstacles to Reform--Shifts in the External Political Climate

From October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976, a democratic political environment provided a highly positive climate for educational reform and optimism was high. As one close UNESCO observer put it,

> The chances of implementation are, however high, as the report of the reform committee has created a framework around which all progressive Thai educators can co-ordinate their action. (Bennett nd :12)

For the most part, internal, organizational factors provided positive conditions for implementation of the reform. The reform committee was led by a dynamic, charismatic individual highly respected in the educational community. Key educators from nearly all key educational agencies were represented on the reform committee. Thus, given this type of full participation, such individuals and their institutions were positive toward the reform. The reform committee's conclusions and recommendations were widely disseminated to the public. The reform report itself was published and marketed throughout Thailand (See Sippanondha 1974). For those at the grass roots level such as the ordinary student the reform offered the hope of

more participation in educational affairs and a more student-centered learning process. For the ordinary teacher and administrator, the reform offered the hope of a more responsive and more accountable administrative system with greater rewards and incentives for relevant professional performance.

Many of these promises, hopes, and dreams disappeared in October, 1976. In September, 1976, students held national demonstrations against the return of a principal military dictator, expelled three years earlier during the massive 1973 student uprising. On October 6, 1976, police invaded Thammasat University in a violent confrontation with students. This chaotic and violent atmosphere provided the context for a military coup d'etat which brought into power a highly conservation and repressive appointed civilian government (see Thak Chaloemtiarana 1978). Ironically, the Minister of Education under the new government was a prominent member of the Education Reform Committee, and former head of the subcommittee on administration. Given this crucial appointment, supporters of the reform were still optimistic about chances for implementation.

The new Minister, however, came out publicly against the reform, and branded the reform document as "socialist." Both understandable political and personal reasons led the Minister to denounce the reform publicly. Ironically, the new government was called the "Reform" government.

In reality, however, a number of the reform measures became law. Under a new National Scheme of Education approved in 1977, Thailand's educational structure was changed in accordance with the reform proposals A new more practical and relevant curriculum was introduced

and the academic examination system significantly liberalized (see Kamol 1977). The Minister of Education fought stridently (and in active defiance of public opinion) to eliminate English language from the primary school curriculum, a suggestion of the Reform Committee. The Minister also introduced a school zoning system in Bangkok as an effort to improve equity and save energy, a policy clearly consistent with the thrust of the Reform Committee.

Despite the partial acceptance of a number of the reform proposals, the Chairman of the original Reform Committee was deeply concerned that a piecemeal implementation of the reform was inadequate and even potentially counterproductive since the reform was proposed as an integrated interdependent set of changes. Thus, for the most part, key members of the reform movement were highly discouraged despite piecemeal adoption of some aspects of the reform.

Conclusions: The Interdependence of Education and Politics--The Importance of the External Context

It may now be useful to reflect upon the Thai experience in educational reform, drawing upon Berman's typology and House's perspective. Of the various factors mentioned by Berman, the episodic change in external conditions is certainly the most germane in the Thai context. The "student revolution" of 1973 gave rise to the reform and the military coup of 1976 dealt a severe blow to chances for a full implementation of the reform.

Also important are the scope and complexity of the change effort. In the Thai case, the reform proposed was extremely broad in scope and highly complex from an organizational perspective. Unifying the complex administrative system of Thai education is a monumental task, given the wide range of bureaucracies involved in education and their respective vested interests. This dimension of the Thai reform also illustrates the significance of House's political perspective. It is somewhat ironic, however, that the ultimate objective of the reform is to reduce the pathological complexity of the original administrative system. Given the scope and complexity of the Thai educational reform effort, it is hardly surprising that only part of the reform had been approved and implemented by 1976.

Berman also mentions the factor of outside assistance. With respect to this issue, the Thais were especially cautious. Foreigners were explicitly excluded from all aspects of the reform effort. As a result, the reform could not be attacked as being Western-derived or influenced. Also, no external funds were used to finance the reform effort.

With respect to participation strategies, a sincere effort was made to involve a wide range of intellectuals and educators in the process of reform. This proved highly effective in generating support for the reform from numerous bureaucratic agencies, an important element in a bureaucratic polity (see Riggs 1966). Nevertheless, the Reform Committee was highly technocratic in make-up and their recommendations were largely research-based. Throughout the

report of the Committee there is certainly an emphasis on rationality and efficiency. In this sense, the reform certainly had an important technological dimension.

With respect to dissemination of the reform and clarity about the innovation, two aspects were of special significance. Thai newspapers, particularly the influential Siam Rath, have published many articles during the reform period highly relevant to and generally supportive of the reform effort. The Chairman of the Reform Committee has also been interviewed on numerous occasions by the media and has been effective in carefully explaining the reform and its underlying rationale. The recommendations of the Reform Committee have also been published both as a complete text and as a shortened summary and widely disseminated.

With regard to the cultural dimension emphasized by House, the Reform Committee failed to include grass roots representatives of farmers and ordinary citizens. This may partially explain some of the difficulties encountered in implementing the curricular aspects of the reform. The curriculum reform approved was, however, significantly influenced by intellectual Buddhist philosophy which emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience, the questioning of authority, and non-hierarchical learning. Such pedagogical values are certainly contray to the values characterizing traditional Thai education. Conflicts in values, particularly between older and younger teachers have certainly affected the implementation of the curricular reform (see Khamman Khontaj 1978).

Initially we raised the question of the relationship between education and politics. Our discussion of the first phase of the Thai educational reform shows the complex interdependent relationship between education and politics. Thai students with aroused consciousness in a massive display of political power overthrew a military dictatorship in October, 1973. This crucial educationally derived political change gave rise to a new democratic political context of openness and made possible the initiation of educational reform in Thailand. Full implementation of the reform, however, was brought to an abrupt halt in 1976 with a military coup d'etat which temporarily terminated Thailand's new experiment with democracy. With respect to the key question raised initially by Kogan, in the Thai case, it seems particularly clear that education itself has given rise to dramatic social change, while at the same time being directly and significantly influenced by the external political context.

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